The Southern Regional
Association for the Blind

CONFERENCE REPORT

No 65

"What is Seeing?"

A Report of an address by
Dr. J. M. Heaton, MA, MB, BChir, DO
given in Westminster, London, SW1
on Thursday 12th July 1973

In the Chair
Mr. John A. Wall, MA(Oxon)
Chairman, Southern Regional Association for the Blind

HV1944
S6
No. 65

M.C. MIGEL LIBRARY
AMERICAN PRINTING
HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND

Report of a Conference held at York Hall, Caxton Hall, Westminster, London, S.W.1. on Thursday, 12th July, 1973

Mr. JOHN A. WALL, M.A. (Oxon.), Chairman of the Association, In the Chair.

THE CHAIRMAN: The speaker this afternoon, Dr. Heaton, is going to talk to us under the general heading of " What is Seeing?". He is one of the fortunate people who has had a very broad schooling in matters medical, psychological and philosophical, and this will enable him to talk in a very much broader way than just as an ophthalmologist.

It is customary for the Chairman to give you a general outline of what the speaker is going to say; and if the Chairman does that particularly well the speaker has little left to say, and so without more ado I will ask him to address us.

DR. J. M. HEATON, M.A., M.B., B.Chir., D.O.: What I wish to do in this paper is to give you a rather different angle on what it is to be blind: Blindness is the negation of seeing. So an understanding of what is meant by " seeing " can lead to an understanding of what it is to be blind. That is my general theme.

For those of us who can see there seems to be no problem about seeing. We just open our eyes and behold, the panorama of the visual world presents itself. Nothing could be simpler. No effort is required. All explanations seem redundant. One just takes it for granted. But for those who cannot see or have difficulty in seeing, matters are very different.

If we cannot see at all and have no memory of ever being able to see, that strange world talked about by the sighted must remain partly an enigma. If we have difficulty in seeing then the objects which we see are refractory and a source of

frustration so long as we keep on trying to see them, and depend on our sight for our actions. It is well known that it is much easier to rehabilitate a person who is totally blind than one who is partially blind and is likely to be flitting between the two worlds.

This afternoon I want to talk about that which is very familiar to most of you — perhaps so familiar that you have not thought about it very much. To a few of you the experiences will be unfamiliar, yet you will have heard them talked about, so you may have thought of them a great deal in the course of your lives.

There are, as everybody knows, a large number of conditions that must be fulfilled before anyone can see. There must be light to see by. The eyes must be open. They must be able to focus and point towards objects properly. Their central area must be as clear as glass so that the rays of light can pass through to the sensitive film at the back of the eye, the retina; and the retina must be very sensitive to light. The optic nerves and the visual part of the brain must be working properly. If one of these conditions is not fulfilled then the person is blind or partially blind.

People who have not thought about seeing find it difficult to realise that it depends upon such an enormously complicated chain of circumstances, because seeing does not feel like that. It feels very simple. It feels as if things were simply there. Now it is this feeling of the visual world being simply there that I want to talk about. I want to unravel some of its simplicity; so I will not be talking about the physical conditions necessary to see, which are a matter of physiology, but about the act of seeing itself.

If we open our eyes, what do we see? We experience a concrete visual world. This world can be described in a number of ways but its main properties seem to be these: it is extended in distance and modelled in depth. It is upright, stable and without boundaries. We see, for example, that there are things beyond the walls of this building, although we cannot actually see what they are. If we look out to sea we see the horizon. We do not have the feeling of being in a box. There is a beyond. There are no boundaries to the visual world.

Also, it is coloured, illuminated and textured. It is composed of surfaces, edges, shapes and interspaces — faces between things. Finally, and most important of all, it is meaningful to us. We know our way about in it and what we can and cannot do with the things in it.

Now let us contrast this substantial visual world with what would be seen by someone in completely empty visual space. Imagine yourself right out in space with no stars, moon or earth to look at. Suppose this environment to be illuminated so that the world is so large as to diffuse the light evenly, as our familiar sky tends to diffuse the light of the sun. If you opened your eyes, what would you see?

There are experiments which yield a reasonably sure answer to this question. The light which stimulates the eyes would be homogeneous, that is, the same at all points. You could turn your eyes in any direction but they could not focus or converge or fixate on anything, because there would be nothing on which to fixate. You could see light and colour but not the kind of colour you are used to seeing, which is always surface colour being localised on and appearing to be part of the surface of things — look at the colour on the chairs, on the carpets, on the walls.

You would see what is called " film " colour, which is a little like the colours of a rainbow, colour which has a filmy and disembodied appearance, floating at an uncertain distance from you. You would not know whether it was near or far away. The sea of light around you might vary from bright to dark and from one colour to another but the quality of the colour would be neither that of a surface, nor would it extend in depth. It would be neither near nor far. The space you would see would not be two-dimensional in the sense of being flat. It would not be three-dimensional in the sense of being deep, either.

Assuming the atmosphere to be cloudless, without dust or fog particles, it would have no texture, no arrangement, no contours, no shapes, no solidity; and no horizon or vertical axis. One would be as well off in absolute darkness as far as one could see anything. This, of course, assumes your brain to be perfectly all right and your eyes open.

Now what would it feel like to be in such a strange visual world? It would be very frightening. One would have no impression of near or far, no sense of one's surroundings as being either flat like a picture or modelled like sculpture. Furthermore, you would have no impression of up and down; because visually there would be no flatness and no horizon by which one could orientate one's self. One's body would be no help because the pull of gravity would be missing. One would feel as if one were floating and would thrash about, not knowing which way up one was. In this situation people would even lose a sense of their own identity because they would not

be able to tell when they had changed their position as they would have no landmarks. One's place in the world would have gone.

We can see from this that there is much more to vision than looking at things. There is far more to seeing than merely being able to distinguish forms as we do when our eyes are tested in the optician's shop. Our eyes are not windows through which we can peer out at the world. They enable us to live in a world; and our sense of our own being is dependent on them. If this visual world becomes empty, as in space, then we become completely lost and do not even know who we are.

To elaborate, experiments show that the sense of who I am depends on you, and your sense of who you are depends upon me and other people in the room. So if the visual world were suddenly to go, those who could see would lose a sense of who they are and would become very de-personalised. In other words, they would feel themselves to be objects, unable to talk. They would lose their sense of identity. Vision is much more than just merely seeing things. It gives a sense of identity.

Let us turn to another rather weird visual experience to which people have subjected themselves. What happens if the whole visual world is turned upside-down? By making people wear special spectacles with reversing mirrors and prisms for several weeks on end the effects of living in an upside-down world can be described. To those who wear these special spectacles everything appears upside-down. People have worn these spectacles for several weeks on end and psychologists have observed what has happened.

Imagine then what would happen to you if everything appeared to be turned upside-down. For the first day or two everything would appear upside-down and the subject himself feels rather weird. He cannot, of course, move without help. Obviously, he feels very unsure of himself. He cannot take hold of things without making errors. He has to be escorted by someone at all times.

After two or three days, however, some very interesting things start happening, because normality begins to reassert itself. The world begins to look as though it is right side up again. Especially, things look the right side up if the person can point towards them or touch them. If, in these conditions, I look at an object it appears upside-down. But if I become involved with it, if I try to touch it or to pick it up, it would then appear the right side up and I would go straight to it. So here is another aspect of the visual world, the connection with action. Involvement makes things go right and lack of

involvement, merely looking at the object, makes it seem all wrong.

Sometimes the person feels that his own body is upside-down. At other times he feels that things are the right way up but that his eyes are at the back of his head and he sees from there, instead of seeing from the front of his head. This is something which is very weird and difficult to understand.

After two weeks or so things become completely normal, especially if the person moves around. But if he just lies still on a bed objects again appear to go upside-down. The same kind of thing happens when he takes the spectacles off. The longest time a person has worn such spectacles is, I believe, about six weeks. When they are removed the world appears to be upside-down, and the same kind of process goes on again, except that the period of adjustment is usually shorter. For perhaps half a day or so everything appears to be upside-down although he is no longer wearing the spectacles. Then he is unsure whether he is seeing things from the front or the back of his head. The more he moves and acts, the more normal things appear.

What does this experiment teach us? It teaches us once more that the eyes are not merely windows through which we look. They involve us. If we have sight we are involved with things. The fact that you can see me involves you with me in a specifically visual way, in a way different from hearing, for example. A person who is able to hear me is involved with me in a different way. The experiment also shows us that the eyes are very much part of our body and of our awareness of our body. It shows that how I feel and experience my body is synonymous with how I see things; this must follow from the weird sensation of seeing from the back of one's head. Therefore, how I feel and experience my body goes with the way in which I see you.

For example, I sense that my feet and the ground are below me and that my body and head are above them, in the same way that vertical things I see around me, like trees, other people and flowers, are above the ground and could, so to speak, look down at the ground, just as I can. Similarly, if you look at me you cannot see my back but you see it in a way because you know it is there. You do not have any sense of my being just a flat bit of cardboard at which you are looking. You can see, in a certain blind kind of way that I am round, that I have a back; just as I see you and know that you are round and are not made of cardboard.

Some people do see others as though they were made of cardboard or flat. Such people have nothing wrong with their eyes or with their brain. It is more a psychological matter, in the sense that they are people who cannot be involved with things.

So the solid things that I see in front of me appear to face me and also have a visual appearance behind them which I cannot see unless I move, or turn them round, in the same way that I am aware of a world which extends backward behind my head but which I cannot see directly until I turn round. So the world outside, and the way we experience our bodies, are geared to one another in a very fundamental way.

This gearing is very much a matter of habit and like all habits we take it for granted. There are, for example, many ways in which we could hold our heads while looking at paintings; but we usually look at them from a fairly standard distance. We stand up straight and move our eyes with moderate frequency. Without realising it, we thereby ensure that the body is stimulated in approximately the same way each time we look at a picture. If we alter these standards then the picture changes. Try looking at your favourite painting with your head between your legs, for example.

Paintings and all visual things are intended to be looked at in a certain way which we just take for granted.

This is all part of a given culture. In different cultures people look at each other from different distances. This makes things very weird and peculiar to a stranger. It is natural for us to talk at this kind of distance, some way apart from each other, so that our visual appearance to each other seems quite natural. But in some cultures, among some African peoples, for example, they may stand very close to each other to talk. So we take the distance between us, as we take our position in looking at paintings, for granted but these are things which have to be learned.

We are told that Michelangelo, after completing his work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, had got so used to lying on his back while painting that he was unable to read a book in any other position. So here a change in the habitual position of his body produced an alteration in how he could see things.

The opposite is sometimes seen in children. For example, it is not uncommon for children to prefer reading books upside-down; and there is no inherent reason why they should not continue to do this all their lives, because if you are used to doing it you can as easily read a book upside-down as right side up. It is only the pressures of social conformity that makes

them change. Sometimes a teacher will compel the child to read a book the right way up but from a purely scientific point of view it makes not one scrap of difference. The stimulus to the eyes is just the same whichever way one reads a book. But here again there is a matter of visual involvement. Certainly, I could not possibly read a book upside-down although the shapes of the letters and the stimuli to my eyes are exactly the same whichever way I may look at print. This is something which is learned and which is dependent on our involvement. I am used to reading a book the right way up so that if I turn it the other way I literally do not see it in the same way. It is, therefore, very much a matter of social conformity.

Vision and the other senses

I want now to discuss seeing from a different point of view and contrast it with the other senses. First of all, let us consider the great number of English words there are to describe different forms of seeing. The most general word is " seeing " which can be compared directly with " hearing ". But think of all the other visual words we can use to describe the perceptual activities of our eyes.

I will go briefly through a number of words, showing how they describe the particular activity of involvement of my eyes with the world, keeping to the theme that seeing is not just a matter of opening my eyes but is something very involved which, in a way, we know about but forget. To " see " is the general term. We ask, " Can he see?" " No, he cannot see, he is blind." We do not ask, " Can he look?" or " Can he gaze?"

We can " look " at things. Looking is different from just seeing. Looking implies that one is examining something. It means analysing something with our eyes, instead of just seeing it. On the whole, I am just seeing all of you. If I look at one of you then I am picking that one person out. Then I am looking at a person, as distinct from seeing them.

Or we can " stare ". This has an aggresive tone. When we stare we can use our eyes as weapons. If we stare at a person he will wonder what is the matter. If we see someone misbehaving themselves we may stare at them, and then they may feel awkward. Then we can " gaze " which is very different from staring. It is very unaggressive. Babies gaze at their mothers long before they can look at them. It is probably the earliest form of seeing. " Looking " implies that there is something to be looked at, but a young baby cannot see objects. Its visual world is more like a dream. Lovers gaze into each other's eyes. They do not look into them except, perhaps, to remove a bit of mascara! When we gaze our faces become

relaxed, vacant and dreamy, in contrast to looking, when they become more tense.

We can " view " things. This is a longer term action. We look at views and we regard things, though that is a term that is not often used. We can " glance " at something. We can " scrutinise ". This implies a careful, rather scientific action. It may be aggressive. We might perhaps scrutinise a stranger entering a room. Then, we can " peer " at things. This implies that we cannot see too well, or that the object peered at is not easily seen. We can " read ". This is an enormously complicated activity and does not apply only to books. People can " read " the tracks of animals in the woods.

We can " watch " things. Usually we do this to things that move. We watch races and the cars going by and so on. It implies that the spectator is standing still or at least is not active. We can " scan " things. We do not often do this but an expert looking at architecture may do it. I was talking about this not long ago to some art students and they told me they are taught to scan architecture. We look at a painting but we scan architecture, because architecture is very big, so we run our eyes over it. This is a different kind of activity from looking or gazing.

Finally, we can " observe " things. This does not necessarily mean that we have to use our eyes, although it usually does, such is the enormous importance of sight in our activities. Observing implies some activity on our part, more activity than merely watching. It is an activity which is of vital importance in science. One of the main things a scientist does is to observe. He is an observer.

Now contrast this great variety of words for various ways of seeing with those for hearing. We can talk of hearing, listening and occasionally of harkening; but not of much else. This applies even more to smell and taste. We can only "smell" or " sniff " things, for example. Thus, you see the huge variety of ways of involvement with seeing but not with smelling or hearing, because we are not so " geared in " to hearing in the same way as we are to seeing.

" Touch " is different from smell and hearing. Touch is more like vision, more like seeing. There are many different words implying different kinds of touch. For example, we can stroke something, we can tickle, caress, fondle, pat and handle; and there are probably even more such words. Touch and seeing are very much allied, and our language shows that. This is because seeing, like touching, implies activity. The hands move towards an object. I can touch, caress, stroke and

so on with my hands, just as I can make different uses of my eyes. But I cannot do that with hearing, smelling or tasting.

In hearing, smelling and tasting there is not much movement of the sense organs. They are rather passive actions. Let me elaborate on this by contrasting the seeing of colours with the hearing of sounds. Now you are hearing and most of you are seeing, too. Colours adhere to things. They are expressed by an adjective. We talk of a red chair or green grass and so on. Sounds are not like that. Sounds are expressed by a verb and are detachable from the sounding body. They may even develop into pure sound, as in music.

My voice is not attached to me. It is all round the room. It comes from me but it is all over the place. It is in your ears in a certain way. That which you can see of me, my fingers for example, are not in your ears but my voice is. Colours are stable; we can look at them and turn away; and when we turn back and look again the colour is still there, the same. But a sound never returns. It is mobile. It is a pulsation. Colours articulate space. They are simultaneously present all the time, separate from the eye that sees them. Sounds are just the opposite. They are very much to do with time. My voice rises and falls and the sounds are heard and then are gone. That is in complete contrast to colour. Sounds arise, last and finish and seem to fill the ear that hears them.

Colours are to be seen in definite directions. They separate and divide, and create contours. Sounds fill space. They abolish differences and bind together and unite. For example, a group listening to music may be spellbound, held together just as, in a way, this audience is held together by my voice. If, for example, I were out in Regents Park and suddenly I stood still and started talking loudly, that would tend to bind together the people around me, and to create a crowd listening to me. Sound brings people together, partly because they are all enveloped in it.

We cast an eye upon colours. They are at a distance from us so we reach over to them. They can beckon us; but we lend an ear to sound. My voice surrounds and penetrates you. We can easily be overpowered by sounds that are very strong and rhythmic. Sounds call to us. We are at their mercy.

It is interesting that the German word for " hearing " — " hören "; for " belonging " — " gehören "; and " servile " — " hörig "; are linked together. In Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German and Russian the words " hearing "; and " obeying " are derived from the same root. English makes no exception; for the verb "obey" stems from the Latin "obaudire"

(to listen from below), a relation more clearly preserved in the noun " obedience ". So there is something rather passive about hearing and rather active about seeing.

It is clear, therefore, that one of the characteristics of seeing is activity. We set our eyes on something. It is a rather extroverted activity, in contrast to hearing which is introverted. The sounds have to enter us. In seeing, as in touching, we reach out towards something; but in listening, as in smelling or tasting, there is nothing clearly defined to reach out towards and the sound, smell or taste permeate us, enter into us.

Impressed by this experience, early thinkers described the physical process of vision correspondingly. For example, Plato asserts that the gentle fire that warms the human body flows out through the eyes in a smooth and dense stream of light. Thus, a tangible bridge is established between the observer and the observed thing; and over this bridge the impulses of light that emanate from the object travel to the eyes and thereby to the soul. This experience remains very much alive; for if you observe someone looking at something in a lively way their eyes seem to glow, as if emitting light.

Seeing involves grasping a few oustanding features of objects — the blueness of the sky, the curve of the swan's neck, the sheen of metal. A few simple lines and dots can be readily recognised as a face. A baby will turn towards a simple diagram of a face. Chimpanzees can be terrified by a stuffed toy with black buttons for eyes. We can identify acquaintances at great distances by nothing more than the most elementary proportions or motions. The tiny modifications of skin tension or skin colour that makes a face look tired, a small change of the line drawn by an eyebrow pencil, or the effect of a few more pounds in body weight will be noticed, even though we cannot tell precisely what causes the change.

In what we see it is the meaning that counts. Human faces are of intense interest to us all, so we can see minute changes in them. The importance of meaning and significance applies to animals, as well. For example, a male robin will start to fight when shown a square inch of the russet breast feathers of its species.

Movement is full of meaning to animals and man. A cat or dog may be resting peacefully, unimpressed by all the colours and shapes that make up the setting around him. But as soon as anything stirs, his eyes will turn to the spot and follow the course of movement. Human beings are similarly attracted by movement. I need only remind you of how we can sit for hours watching things go by.

It is understandable that movement should have great significance as it implies a change in the environment that might require a response — the approach of danger, the appearance of a friend or desirable prey. Happenings, then, attract us more spontaneously than things do; and the prime characteristic of a happening is motion.

Vision and Language

To conclude, I want to remind you of the profound link between happenings, meanings and language. I cannot illustrate this better than by quoting from a famous passage in the autobiography of Helen Keller in which this remarkable woman, who was totally blind and deaf, described the dawn of language upon her. One day her teacher took her out for a walk. Her memoir reads:

> " She brought me my hat and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.
>
> We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over my hand she spelled into the other the word " water ", first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that in time could be swept away.
>
> I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange new sight that had come to me."

A long commentary could be written on this passage but I want to make only two points; first, that it was a happening that brought language to Helen Keller — the flow of water over her fingers. Secondly, and most fascinating to me, she says that when language had revealed itself to her she " saw everything with the strange new sight that had come to me ". Here is a totally blind person using visual terms — language had enabled her to " see ". So language can enable the blind to see.

Meaning and language make man's world far more than mere sensation. A person like Helen Keller, bereft of sight and hearing, is capable of living in a far wider and richer world than any dog or ape with all its senses alert. Seeing, therefore, involves much more than just the eyes. It involves the whole of our being; and perhaps the blind are only completely blind to things which cannot exist for them; that is, things which can only be perceived visually.

For example, there are things that are too far distant, like clouds, stars and birds in flight; frail things such as soap bubbles, dewdrops, puffs of smoke, which cannot be recognised by touch. Things that are too small are also unrecognisable. Thus, tiny but otherwise lifelike models of animals; or things that are too big to be observed in their entirety, like mountains, buildings; some dangerous things like flames and oil; or things that are out of reach but quite near, like fishes swimming in water behind glass.

It is clear, however, from what Helen Keller told us, that language enables us to transcend our senses and that, although the blind cannot use their eyes, they can in a way " see ". So what is seeing? It is much more than having functioning eyes and a brain because, as I said earlier, in completely empty space sighted people would be utterly disorientated and would not know who or where they were. They would "see" far less than Helen Keller who was totally blind. It is dependent upon how we experience our whole bodies, for with upside-down vision the visual world does not come aright unless we move around and try to touch and feel things.

We have seen that it is more allied to touch than to smell, taste or hearing; for seeing involves a going-out towards something, an extension of ourselves. We search around with our eyes in much the same way as we feel around with our fingers to touch something we cannot see. Finally, seeing is intimately involved with language and meaning. Words enable us to see and to recognise things. Just think of a gamekeeper opening your eyes to all the things to be seen in the woods, or the art critic to all that is to be seen in a painting; or how, by describing a dream, we can see it again in greater detail than we did when we first remembered it.

Seeing is not a specialised activity. It is monadic, involving all that is human; and to understand it involves understanding what it is to be human.

DISCUSSION

The Chairman: As I indicated when I introduced Dr. Heaton, he is willing and anxious that you should express your

views now, and to answer questions. I am sure all of us have found his talk very interesting and thought-provoking.

I found very intriguing his statement that touch perhaps rather more than hearing could be compared with sight so far as its variability was concerned, the different ways one could do it. I would like to ask Dr. Heaton whether he would agree with me that for a blind person hearing is by far and away the most useful of the residual senses. I believe most of us feel that hearing is a very important source of information and therefore, of course, that a deaf-blind person is in a very difficult position. Would Dr. Heaton agree that for a blind person hearing is the most important of the senses from the point of view of obtaining information?

Dr Heaton: I do not know whether I would altogether agree with that. It is a very good question in bringing out what I have been trying to talk about. It is very rare for a person to be totally deprived of the sense of touch so we do not know very much about what it is like to be deprived of the sense of touch and feeling; because touch implies being able to touch ourselves, to feel ourselves.

For example, one can have a limb totally deprived of any sense of touch. If that happens then, of course, the limb is totally useless. If the whole of my body suffered total loss of the sense of touch I do not think I would be able to move around at all; I would be quite helpless.

On the other hand, the Chairman is right that from the point of view of information, getting to know about things, probably hearing is more important.

For example, while I am speaking I might fiddle about with this pencil. That is not giving me information. I am not really seeking information about my pencil; but it helps to give me the same sort of feeling as having my feet on ground. It gives me a feeling of being "at home", of knowing where I am. We take it utterly for granted. If people are in a situation in which they do not feel at all "at home" then they cannot take in information. You in the audience have to feel "at home" now. Anyone who runs a meeting will take care to make people have that feeling and be reasonably comfortable, because if you did not know who, what or where you were you would not be in the least interested in my talk or in any information I have to give you. You would be utterly involved in trying to get your base again.

One of the things I have tried to get across is that for people who see, vision is important in enabling them to feel "at home"; for example, the fact that I see you all upright.

Just imagine that one or two of you started seeing things upside-down. If that were to happen those people would not be listening to me any longer. They would be frightened and anxious and trying to find where they were. In a certain sense the feeling of where I am, of stability, of feeling at home in my world is visual.

No doubt you will have had far more experience than I have of helping blind people find their way about the streets, mobility. It is not only a matter of information. The first thing is that a person must feel at home in that kind of world. If I were to be blindfolded and have to move around this room then the first thing I would have to do, or the first thing anyone trying to help me would have to do, would be to get me to feel "at home", to feel O.K. They would not at first worry so much about information, or about how to get from here to there.

My first wish would be then to go to somewhere utterly familiar, like my flat or somewhere that I knew well. Then I would not want to move from there until I was given help to feel at home in the outside world. There is a contrast that I want to draw between the feeling that vision gives one of being at home, and then the various kinds of information. You here now are not seeking visual information, for I have none to give you, other than the look you gave to me when I first came in, when you looked to see what kind of a person I was. You have from me all the visual information that you want; and you had it within a matter of seconds. But if I were suddenly to start whirling around you would be very upset. You take for granted the fact that I am stable. Because my visual appearance and the visual appearance of the hall enables you to feel at home you can then take information from me, but through your ears not your eyes.

Miss Susan Hicks (S.R.A.B.): There is an important difference to be drawn between total blindness and residual or peripheral vision. Most of the people who are registered blind in Great Britain still have a varying degree of residual vision. In fact, only about 17 per cent. are totally, or practically totally blind for mobility purposes. In the field as mobility officers we have to teach people with varying degrees of residual vision to live with what sight they have for 24 hours a day. We cannot treat them as being totally blind, for teaching purposes, because invariably they cling to what they have.

I believe the most obvious need, therefore, is for much more intensive research into how the partially blind can be helped to develop and improve the residual vision they still

have. If they have to live in a sighted world as partially-sighted people then we surely owe it to them to use our expertise and knowledge in this direction.

DR. HEATON: I suspect from watching and talking to the relatively few such people with whom I have had contact who have peripheral vision, that it is the " at homeness " they seek. They cling to their residual vision not because it gives them information, or very much information, but because it makes them feel at home. I feel that sometimes authorities are not very clear about that. They are so committed to the idea that vision is just to do with information that they do not look beyond that.

If you are tested for vision you are tested for the information you can get through your eyes, whether for example you can read 6/6. The tester is concerned purely with information. The ophthalmologist or the psychologists have until fairly recently sometimes forgotten that for a person who sees, and has seen, it is vision more than anything that gives a sense of being at home.

Supposing suddenly a howling noise started all over this room. People would not get into a panic about it. They would probably talk to each other about it and think it was peculiar. Probably someone would go to see what was causing it, but generally people would not be greatly bothered by it.

But supposing the visual world were to change. Supposing you were suddenly to see me turning round and upside down and everything around you appeared topsy-turvy. I would suspect that if that were to happen you would panic. I believe that is linked with the wish of people having partial vision to cling to what vision they have left. People who seek to train them cannot understand and they may say to the person, " You cannot get much information from your eyes, from just seeing." That is true but they completely forget that that is not what we are mainly concerned about. By far the most important thing, for most of the time, is feeling familiar in the world in which we are. That is crucial to all human beings.

If a child does not feel reasonably familiar with school, and at home there, we may try to cram information into that child but it just will not hear it. There is a great deal of evidence on this. The word " cling " has been mentioned. There is evidence that to some people the visual world is like a mother. This clinging to residual vision is rather like a child who, fearing he is going to lose his mother, clings to her. The child who clings to its mother's hand is seeking not information but a sense of familiarity and " at homeness ".

Miss Susan Hicks: I would think that the aim should be to help people to adjust psychologically to their own particular degree of blindness. They ought not to be treated as totally blind when they are not. There should be a whole new approach to the problem, so that the registered blind person is taught to move around and to function as well as he possibly can in a sighted world. Not enough has been done in this direction.

Dr. Heaton: I believe that is so. It would have to be worked out quite empirically, pragmatically, to see whether it worked, and whether the degree of peripheral vision that a person has is going to remain. You are right in that we should try to teach them to use their vision to feel fairly at home, and to get the information they need through their ears. Some such approach could be very important, I agree.

Mr. E. W. Page (Partially-Sighted Society): It has been stated by an ophthalmologist that is is inherent in us to seek to use any of the senses that are deteriorating to their last dregs; that it is instinctive. After 54 years' experience I feel it is about time we got down to brass tacks and began to view this whole question from another angle. I fully support what has been said by the last speaker. In the modern partially-sighted school we are training people to appreciate colour, shape and form — by which I mean depth — to a point at which mobility can be enhanced.

Might I suggest that because our methods go back to 1923, when there was a preponderance of total blindness in this country, and as there is today a quite different situation, we should take steps towards a completely new look at this problem, to see just how far we can teach the partially blind to make the fullest possible use of their residual vision, peripheral sight, accepting that this would mean adapting our teaching methods?

The Chairman: I have been totally blind since the age of eight and I have had plenty of experience of living in a sighted world and pretending I am sighted, using words which are only meaningful in relation to sight. I would like to ask Dr. Heaton whether he would consider that for a blind person effectively to pretend he is sighted could have any latent or serious psychological bad effect?

Dr. Heaton: I would say the answer is " No ". I suppose it depends partly on what you mean by " pretending to be sighted ". Of course, there may be some people who pretend too hard, and try to force themselves to do things which they cannot do. I believe that could have bad psychological consequences. There is no evidence that a person who pretends

and knows he is pretending in some sense does any harm to himself.

On the comments of the previous speaker, I agree with what he said. I believe the way in which any such new look would arrive would be by listening and paying much more attention to what blind and partially-sighted people say about themselves and their experiences. The trouble is that sighted people rather tend to dictate how things should be, whereas there is a mass of evidence that the sighted person takes too much for granted.

Although it is not often done I believe the way to learn about disabilities, and to take a new look at them, is to listen to the disabled person, to the people who are concerned. The trouble is that many disabled people are sometimes rather battered into submission by the so-called "experts" who are sighted. Those people may forget that while they may be experts at seeing they are not experts at not seeing.

I see infinitely better than a person with peripheral vision but certainly it is far better for the people with only peripheral vision to continue to see whatever they can see, using what vision they have. They are better at using the little they have than I would be, because I have not had that experience and they have. If one talks to people who have not been battered into submission they are full of experience and tricks which would never have been thought of by a person not affected in that way.

Alderman Fred Yates (Leicester Health Committee). In your address you have presented a picture to us. You have talked about the boundaries of our eyes, about looking or seeing beyond these walls. You talked about horizons, and about how far we could see, and what we saw when we looked, and how things presented themselves to us. My question is: "Cannot we see more with our mind's eye than we can with our body's eyes?" You spoke of looking, of lovers gazing into each other's eyes, for example. You spoke about light and shadow and many other things. What can we do to make it possible for blind people to see more with the mind's eye? Cannot we let the mind's eye be the basis of the language they learn by which they might be able to "see"?

Secondly, you said you thought it was easier to teach a person who was totally blind than one who was partially-sighted. Is this really true?

Dr. Heaton: I believe it is true because of the conflict that the partially-sighted have in seeing and hearing. It may possibly be due to bad teaching methods. I believe it is

usually reported by people experienced in the rehabilitation of the blind and partially-sighted that the totally blind prove easier. Certainly, that was found to be so during the war, with casualties. One of the factors may be that people may be unsure about whether they are going to lose even more sight. Certainly, it seems easier to rehabilitate the person who knows where he is in relation to his disability than one who perhaps has a little sight left and feels, and may be encouraged to feel, sometimes wrongly, that he might get back a little of his sight or may not lose what little he has left.

Your first question is a very big one and difficult to answer. It brings up the whole question of the teaching of blind people. I can only repeat that it is probably better to listen more to them and try to help them, from the situation in which they feel at home, rather than trying to force them into some mould which comes more from the imagination of sighted persons about what it is to be unsighted. It should come more from the blind persons' actual experience of being blind.

Mr. Page: I was not suggesting that where a person's sight is deteriorating rapidly we should do anything other than prepare that person for total sightlessness. On the other hand, so many of us know from experience that as sight goes a person can adjust, if he is helped. So let us not think of plunging into some quite different approach to teaching the partially-sighted. Let us help people to make the best possible use of whatever they have.

Mr. John Mills (Leicester City): I recently read an article in which it was suggested that because of the absence of visual stimuli the physical and mental functions of the totally blind tended to be at a lower level than those of the sighted. What does the speaker think about that?

Dr. Heaton: I do not agree. I suppose the person who wrote that was under the influence of a rather old-fashioned approach, with its prejudice against the unsighted person. I know of no evidence at all to show that blind people cannot reach as great a state of consciousness as seeing people. I would think Helen Keller was a prize example. Who could say that someone who was blind and deaf could not reach the degree of consciousness and awareness that the sighted can, when we have that example? No doubt she had a much greater state of consciousness and awareness than most people have.

I suppose this myth is a little self-perpetuating. There is no doubt that many blind people are depressed, but their depression is not due to their blindness *per se* but to their inability to get over their loss of sight. They mourn the loss of their sight and their ability. I believe a blind person can live just as full a life as a sighted person.

People always tend to have a prejudice against those who are in some way different. In anthropology, for example, people used to think — I do not know whether they do so as much now — that natives were to be pitied because they had not got motor cars, that they had only bows and arrows and that in that sense they were deprived compared with us. Few people who have had much experience of so-called " native " people would agree with that. It is commonplace that one can have all one's faculties and masses of money and yet still feel very deprived in certain ways.

I believe that outlook is just to do with this ambivalence that so many people have about other people. People tend to think that they themselves are better off than some others, or perhaps that they are worse off than others. There is that old saying about " the grass being greener in the next field ". I think that applies here.

THE CHAIRMAN: We have come to the end of our meeting. I would ask Mr. Starling whether he would be good enough to propose a vote of thanks to our speaker.

MR. W. S. STARLING (Executive Committee, S.R.A.B.): It is my privilege and very great pleasure to move a hearty vote of thanks to Dr. Heaton for his interesting talk to us this afternoon; and I do so on your behalf. He has spoken on a subject which I am sure you will agree is very close to us all. We will remember and bear in mind the points that he has made, to see how they can help those of us who are concerned in this work.

MR. HARTSHORN (Director of Social Services, Ipswich C.B.): I am delighted to second that vote of thanks to Dr. Heaton for his talk and for giving us a new look on what we see.

The vote of thanks was carried with acclamation.

THE CHAIRMAN: I would like to make just one comment. We have all heard a lot of talk about Women's Lib. Those of us in the Blind world also know a little about Blind Lib. In other words, many blind people nowadays are finding that they can participate a great deal more in blind welfare. What Dr. Heaton has said this afternoon has given them a good deal of ammunition and I am sure they will be very grateful to him. Thank you again, Dr. Heaton, for coming and we are most grateful to you for sparing time from your very busy life to spend an afternoon with us.

(*Applause*). That concludes the afternoon's activities and I hope you all travel home safely.

The meeting then closed.

BF241 Heaton, J.M. c.1
H352 "WHAT IS SEEING?"
W556

(n.d.)

Date Due

Reference Copy			

AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR THE BLIND
15 WEST 16th STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011

Copies of this Report are obtainable from:
The General Secretary,
32 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP.
Southern Regional Association for the Blind,
Telephone 01-839 2816

HADDEN BEST & Co Ltd, Portman Road, Ipswich IP1 2BN